

Thanks

First, thank you for sharing your email address with me so that my office and I can periodically update you on what we're trying to do.

Budget Hole

During the campaign, I noted that Mississippi was in the worst financial shape ever. My first three months in office has certainly confirmed that.

Budget projections for the upcoming fiscal year (which begins July 1) said the state government's general fund spending would be \$709 million more than its regular income. This was after several years of raiding special funds, trust funds and depleting the "rainy day" fund established during the Fordice administration.

"Operation: Streamline"

So I proposed my "Operation Streamline" budget – to reduce the shortfall by half, from \$709MM to \$356MM, and to totally eliminate it the following year. This is far and away the largest proposal for savings in state history. It would also cut the raid on special funds in half with a goal of eliminating the practice the following year.

The Senate has passed nearly all these savings proposals. The House has adopted some. Hopefully, all of them will be passed at the end of the day; otherwise, there will not be nearly enough money to properly fund critical areas like education.

There are no politically popular solutions to our fiscal crisis – we started off too far in the hole. But we must adopt an honest budget that makes legitimate savings and funds priorities appropriately. The worst thing we could do is appropriate money for schools that won't really be there when the time comes to pay the bills. That would result in mid-year cuts like three years ago. I won't be part of giving education a bad check.

Good News For Education

I am happy to report that I continue to fight for life-long education in Mississippi. And, we just got some good news. It turns out that our school districts have at least \$350 million in "rainy day funds" to spend on education. I have called on the Department of Education to give State leaders an up-to-date accounting of these "rainy day funds" as of April 30, 2004. The Legislature can only make accurate decisions about education funding with all of the available facts. But let's be clear about one thing: with knowledge of this extra money, scaring teachers and students – not to mention terminating teachers – was wrong. Of our 152 school districts, we are told that 2,000 teachers were fired due to the budget crisis. That is approximately \$70 million in teacher salaries, or only 20% of the total "rainy day funds" that we know of. Now that we in government have this information, we need to conduct the debate on facts, not polemics and scare tactics – because our teachers and students deserve better.

End Lawsuit Abuse

Ending lawsuit abuse in Mississippi continues to be a critical goal, and I'm pleased that the Senate has repeatedly voted overwhelmingly for comprehensive tort reform. Regrettably, the House has not been allowed to vote on any tort reform bill. There can be

no reconciling of the Senate and House positions until the House is allowed to vote and establish its position.

The opponents of tort reform seem to recognize that a majority of House members would vote for a comprehensive bill – and that is why no vote has been allowed. I will continue to fight for tort reform. I hope it will be adopted during this regular session because there's no reason to do tomorrow what you can do today. However, if the forces against tort reform prevent that, I will call a special session.

Lawsuit abuse is an enormous obstacle to job creation and economic growth in our state. Those who dispute this are ignoring the obvious facts and the repeated evidence of harm that is apparent to people all over the country. We cannot solve our problems by ignoring them or sweeping them under the rug. We must address them head on, solve them, and then go on to other issues—of which we have plenty. Help me resolve lawsuit abuse by making sure your legislators know your views on this crucial subject. Urge them to act – whether they agree with me on everything or not. We need to end lawsuit abuse and end it this year.

Voter ID

Another issue still to be completed is a voter ID requirement. Both houses have passed bills, but there are a couple of very significant differences. The largest and most important is over granting an exemption from the requirement to voters 65 and older – which the House wants to do. This would be terrible policy. The main purpose of a voter ID requirement is to prevent the electoral fraud of one person voting while using someone else's name. The most obvious opportunity is to pretend to be someone who has died but whose name has not been removed from the voter rolls. Of course, most of the people in the cemetery were born before 1940 – but anyone pretending to be such a person would not have to show any identification if the exemption were permitted. This exemption must be removed from the bill. The federal law that Hillary Clinton, Teddy Kennedy and John Kerry supported does not have an exemption from its voter ID requirement for older people. Seniors are already accustomed to showing ID for Medicare benefits, Social Security, banking, traveling, etc. An age exemption would be both counterproductive and unnecessary.

Workforce Development / Job Creation

Both houses have also been very receptive and helpful on our comprehensive workforce development/ job training reform proposal. Similar bills have passed both houses, and a conference agreement appears imminent. I appreciate everybody's help – and I believe our streamlined system will pay hefty returns in short order. In fact, the federal government tells us it will adopt many of our changes for their program. Employers and potential and current employees should see a difference soon.

All the above initiatives will help create and retain more and better-paying jobs. The most urgent, immediate need for Mississippi is job creation, and I'm making that my #1 priority. I'm pleased that unemployment has fallen significantly in the last several weeks. We are now well under national unemployment, with a lot going on in the area.

Of course, creating jobs means not raising taxes. I'm pleased that there has been very little sentiment for tax increases, despite a recent flurry in the House. I'm against raising anybody's taxes and most legislators are, too.

Conscience Exception

I am happy to report on one of the items I mentioned in my "State of the State Address" and worked hard for this Session. Thanks to your help, we were able to pass a law that gives health care providers the right to refuse, without fear of retribution, to perform abortions if abortion goes against their conscience. Your Legislature was very supportive of this measure – please thank them.

Reach Out

Look at the attached list of newspaper links and send one of these suggested "Letters to the Editor" to your local paper.

Look at the attached list of legislators and e-mail them about one of these subjects. Thank them for their support or urge them to action on issues you care about.

Raise Your Sights

Together, we will make Mississippi a better place. It may be a tough slog at times, but I relish the challenge. Walking together and raising our sights, I know that there is nothing Mississippians cannot achieve.